Comparative / Historical Methods
A Graduate Seminar / Dept of Sociology, Rutgers, Fall 2013 / 16.920.520.01
Tuesdays, 9:30-11:50 pm, Seminar Room, Dept of Sociology, Davison Hall (DC)

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This is a graduate reading and “hands-on” research seminar on comparative-historical methods, geared toward the needs of advanced graduate students in sociology. There is, of course, no method without a theory, so this is, at least implicitly, a theory-intensive course.

There is thinking without comparing, so this material could be useful for all people who think (including sociologists). All social objects have historicity, so, strictly speaking, sociology of any time point, including the present, ought to incorporate a historical dimension. In sociology, as it is done in north America today, ‘comparative-historical’ is a label under which we tuck a very heterogeneous set of research practices that:

- use more than one “case(s)” to address a substantive problem,
- address some aspect of social change instead of stagnancy,
- focus on places other than the U.S.,
- emphasize the connectedness of various geographically defined units of analysis, instead of separating them, including those that prefer thinking of such networks of connectedness as “systems”, e.g., world-~, etc.;
- try to understand a social phenomenon anchored in a time point other than, or not only, “now,”
- see the present (or any other time) as connected, in meaningful ways, to the past, and
- various combinations / critiques of the above.

This course is appropriately heterogeneous. In it, we discuss readings and do a set of exercises designed to enhance your skills in the comparative-historical “area.” The readings fall under the following types: (1) texts about various aspects of comparative-historical methods (research designs and techniques) and (2) examples as scholars employ those methods. The purpose of the class is gaining literacy, devising critique and inspiration. You are expected to:

- come to class fully prepared, with an active interest in comparative-historical sociology, an investigative curiosity and a mature intellectual agenda,
- contribute your unique perspective and experience to the discussions, and
- complete the exercises on time (no extensions).

Grading will be based on a judicious combination of the following factors and approximate weights:

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<th>In-class performance / contribution / constructiveness / creativity</th>
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| Exercise 1 (macro-historical data) | 10% |
| Exercise 2 (original historical source exercise) | 15% |
| Exercise 3 (comparative original historical source exercise) | 10% |
| Exercise 4 (oral history) | 15% |
| Exercise 5 (your research design) | 20% |


**SCHEDULE**

9/3  **Introduction: people, course and issues**


9/10  **Invitation and critique**


9/17  **Archeology and Genealogy**


9/24  **Thinking “Big”**


Deadline for, and discussion of, Exercise 1: Macro-Historical Data!!

+ “Large-N” Models


“Small-N” Comparative Work & The Negative Case


10/15 Single-N “Stories”


10/22 The Extended Case Method–How Far Can It Be Extended?


10/29 Reflexivity: What is Reflected on What?


11/5 Deadline for, and discussion of, Exercise 2: Guidebook to Europe!!!

+ Clues: Taking Advice from Freud, Sherlock Holmes and the Inquisition


11/12
Deadline for, and discussion of, Exercise 3: Guidebook in A Comparative Framework!!!

What Is NOT An Archive?


11/19
Silencing the Past

Deadline for, and discussion of, Exercise 4: Oral History

Experience & Oral History


Sarkar, Mahua. 2006. “Difference in Memory.” Comparative Studies in Society and History, 48,1:


12/3 Interpretation


12/10 Deadline for Exercise 5: Your Research Design

Tying Loose Ends

No reading 8)
Take-Home Exercises:

Exercise 1:  **Secondary Analysis of Macro-Historical Data**

due in class on Oct 1

Try a creative analysis with the Maddison data set provided through [http://sakai.rutgers.edu](http://sakai.rutgers.edu). There is no need to get into high-power statistical techniques; the purpose is to examine the plausibility of ideas regarding the substantive phenomena that are represented in the data. Hint: graphs, tables and simple statistical tests constitute some of the most useful ways to do this.

Exercise 2:  **Analysis of a Primary Document**

due in class on Nov 5

The purpose of this exercise is to give you some experience in the kind of interpretive work that historians and even some brave historical sociologists do with “primary sources.” For this assignment, we will use an old book, *A Satchel Guide for the Vacation Tourist in Europe*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912. Study it carefully. (And handle it carefully as it is a rare book.)

Prepare a maximum 1000-words-long discussion, focussing on how the document was prepared, the nature of its contents, its strengths and weaknesses as an historical source, possible errors of commission or omission contained in the document, and the ways in which the information contained in it might be useful for answering sociologically relevant questions. In preparing to write, you might want to think about some of the following issues:

- Who composed the document, and why? Why has it survived and have any changes been introduced over the years? What methods appear to have been used to acquire the information contained in the document?
- What are some of the biases in the document and how might you go about checking them or correcting for them? Was there a time lapse between the writing and the publication of the document? How reliable or dispassionate was the person who wrote the document? Under what institutional constraints or routines was he or she probably operating, and how might these have affected the document?
- Evaluate the possible uses of the document as (1) a direct report about the past and (2) an index of institutional activities or cultural outlooks. What role did etiquette, convention, and custom play in the composition of the document?
- Are there any contradictions within the document, or with otherwise known facts, that might lead you to question the credibility of pieces of information contained in it? What other kinds of documents or sources of evidence might you consult to correct biases, check inaccuracies, or provide further evidence on issues connected with the document? If you relied solely upon advice contained in the document, how might your vision of the past be distorted?
- What are the key categories and concepts used by the writer(s) to organize the ideas presented? What are the selectivities or silences that result from these categories of thought?
- Identify some questions in historical social science that this document might help to answer. With what methods of analysis could one use this document (and perhaps others like it) to address those questions in a reliable and valid way? Are there questions for which this document might seem appropriate, but where, in fact, it could an investigator astray?

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1 If you wish to consult further sources on primary sources, look up the readings recommended in the annotated bibliography at the end of
Exercise 3: **Comparative Analysis of Primary Documents**

Due in class on Nov 12

Choose a contemporary item to serve as a comparative counterpart to the document used in Exercise 3. Keeping in mind the considerations developed with respect to the item in Exercise Two, sketch a 1200-2000 word comparative analysis of the two explaining:

- the most important facts that make the two documents comparable,
- the most significant ways in which they differ from each other, and
- what sociological inference you derive from those observations.

Exercise 4: **Secondary Reading of an Oral History Interview**

Due in class on Nov 26

I have placed a link to the transcript of one of Rutgers Libraries’ rich Oral History Archives—a life history interview with Clarence Wilson—in [http://sakai.rutgers.edu](http://sakai.rutgers.edu). Read the transcript carefully, preferably several times, and annotate it as for pointers to possible historical-sociological issues that could yield interesting insights about the times, society at the time, and various specific social issues as narrated in the interview. Pay close attention to language, the interviewer-interviewee relationship, and implicit and explicit frames of social ordering as they emerge from the text. Bring to class, and hand in, the annotation in such a format that it should be intelligible to another researcher (in this case: József). Be prepared to contribute to an in-class discussion.

Exercise 5: **Your Own Research Design**

Due in class on Dec 10 (last class meeting)

Devise a research design (between 1500 and 2500 words) that addresses a substantive problem of your choosing that calls for a comparative and/or historical research strategy. Elaborate the research puzzle, argue the way in which you can ascertain answers to the puzzle by considering a selection of cases, periods, etc. Make sure the design is within the realm of the possible (imagine that you will have a chance to obtain some funding, but no more than $15,000.00 for a year, to do this research). Of course you will not have to do the research itself (unless you really insist. 😊)

The Rutgers Sociology Department strives to create an environment that supports and affirms diversity in all manifestations, including race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, religion, age, social class, disability status, region/country of origin, and political orientation. We also celebrate diversity of theoretical and methodological perspectives among our faculty and students and seek to create an atmosphere of respect and mutual dialogue. We have zero tolerance for violations of these principles and have instituted clear and respectful procedures for responding to such grievances.